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Rulan Chao Pian 卞赵如兰 (1922–2013)

Emily E. Wilcox

Rulan Chao Pian, who taught Chinese and music at Harvard University from 1947 to 1992, was a pioneer in the fields of Chinese Song dynasty musical history and ethnomusicological studies of Peking opera and Sinophone popular performance.

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Professor Rulan Chao Pian 卞赵如兰 (1922–2013) was an eminent American ethnomusicologist who taught at Harvard University from 1947 until 1992. When appointed as a full professor in 1974, she was one of the first women to achieve this status in the university's history. Pian and her husband were also the first faculty of color to serve as housemasters at Harvard, making Pian a pioneer in the advancement of both women and minorities in the US academy. Pian trained a number of prominent ethnomusicologists and Sinologists during her long career, and she was instrumental in establishing the field of ethnomusicology at Harvard. As a professor of both music and East Asian languages and civilizations, Pian's scholarly contributions spanned several areas, including language acquisition, music history, folk performance, and traditional drama. Pian's work is characterized by a deep commitment to empiricism, as well as a strongly analytical approach that highlights the structural and technical features of music as they relate to other frameworks of performance, such as narrative development, ritual process, and stage choreography. As a founding member

and regular contributor to the Conference on Chinese Oral and Performing Literature (CHINOPERL), Pian helped establish and nurture the field of Chinese performance scholarship in North America (Yung and Lam 1994; Yung et al. 2013).

Pian's 1967 research monograph *Song Dynasty Musical Sources and Their Interpretation* (Harvard University Press, 1967; reprint Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2003) established her as a pioneer in the fields of Chinese music history and musicological research methods. In 1968, *Interpretation* won the prestigious Otto Kinkeldey Award from the American Musicological Society for the best book published by a society member in the previous year. At the time of the book's reprint edition in 2003, it was still the most cited reference on Song dynasty music in studies published outside mainland China (Lam 2003: xxix). Transcriptions of historical music notations make up a large portion of the book, which Pian undertook in a meticulous manner that reflected her commitment to empiricism. In an introduction to the book's 2003 reprint, Joseph Lam writes:

The *Interpretation* highlights notated music as objectifiable, verifiable, and analyzable representation of musical sounds, and thus transcriptions from historical Chinese notation to Western staff notation occupy the bulk of the monograph. The transcriptions, however, specify only pitch. Verifiable data on rhythm and performance techniques of Song dynasty music is sketchy, and can only be realized with unverifiable speculations; Professor Pian shunned speculations. As a result, her transcriptions project a very strong sense of incompleteness, forcing readers and musicians to confront what is verifiably knowable and not knowable about Song dynasty music, the actual sounds of which have long vanished. . . . Professor Pian exposed gaps and ambiguities in historical facts and theories about Chinese music and music history. (Lam 2003: xx–xxi)

In her approach to Chinese music history, Pian reflected trends that were common in North American musicology at the time. However, these trends were to shift in the following decades, as Western musicology became increasingly focused on Euro-American traditions, while study of non-Western music was increasingly shifted to the emerging field of ethnomusicology, with its focus on living and vernacular forms and its use of field methods and social analysis (Lam 2003: xxvi–xxvii).

Pian's career in many ways reflects this larger shift in North American music scholarship. After *Interpretations*, the majority of Pian's publications focus on contemporary oral performance and indigenous musical theatre, based on field research and live recordings conducted in China and Taiwan. Although she never published a second research

monograph, her vast collection of articles and field reports published throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s constitutes a significant contribution to what was then a newly emerging research field in North America: Sinophone ethnomusicology and performance studies. In these works, Pian offers translations, notations, and analysis of a wide range of Chinese performance genres, including Peking opera, Peking drum song, medley song, Dongbei *errenzhuan* (couple song and dance duet), southern narrative song (*tanci*), Gansu flower songs, and the Confucian sacrificial ceremony (Yu 1994). Through her field research, Pian amassed an extensive collection of audiovisual recordings, books, and musical instruments related to Chinese performance culture, which are now available in a special collection at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. A massive contribution to performance documentation, the collection contains more than seven thousand audiovisual recordings from Pian's personal archives (Chinese University of Hong Kong 2014). Pian also left a collection of field and audio recordings, books, and scores to Harvard's Loeb Music Library, which includes an extremely rare Ming dynasty *qin* (zither) anthology printed in China in 1609 (Hollis Online Catalog n.d.).

Despite this shift from music history to ethnomusicological study of contemporary vernacular performance, Pian retained her interest in musical form as the fundamental focus of her research. In her analysis of works of Chinese oral performance and indigenous theatre, Pian exhibits an extraordinary ability to make technical musical analysis innovatively serve the goal of understanding the role of music in an organic theatrical whole. This method can be seen, for example, in her article "Aria Structural Patterns in the Peking Opera," published in 1975. In the article, Pian sets out to answer two questions: "Why is [Peking opera] not simply a spoken play with incidental music?" and "What is the difference between a dramatic aria and a ballad song?" (Pian 1975: 64). The answer to these questions, Pian argues, lies in the classification and structure of *jingju* (Peking opera) arias. Through an analysis based on her own original aria classification system and what she calls "structural features" of *jingju*, Pian demonstrates why arias with certain musical features are selected to accompany particular narrative scenes, as well as why and how they are combined with spoken elements and instrumental music to produce specific performance effects. In her analysis, for example, Pian compares a song and comment sequence organized in one pattern, which produces a playful effect for a scene in which one character is guessing the other's thoughts, to one organized in another pattern, in which it produces an accelerated tension for a courtroom scene of a plaintiff pleading for her life. Thus, Pian shows how different patterns of arranging aria, speech, and accompaniment

in relation to one another can dramatically change the performance effect of a scene. In this way, Pian shows how musical analysis must be combined with analysis of both dramatic text and live performance in order to understand the role of music in *jingju* as a theatrical whole.

Pian further develops these insights in her 1979 article “Rhythmic Texture in the Opera ‘The Fisherman’s Revenge.’” Here, she continues her examination of the relationship between music and dramatic effect, this time through an analysis of the coordination (or lack thereof) between the various layers of human voice and instrumental components in *jingju* performance. Based on a recording that Pian herself made in 1964, she offers a detailed analysis of one *jingju* work through the framework of what she calls “rhythmic texture,” or the effect of juxtaposed rhythmic movements in the relationship between music and dramatic action (Pian 1979). In one of seventeen different rhythm patterns identified in the paper, Pian describes how multiple juxtaposed musical elements produce tension in a scene of an old fisherman struggling to pull in his fishing net, or produce the effect of water in a scene in which the fisherman and his daughter are resting next to their docked boat. Pian’s account of the latter effect, what she calls “Water Sound” (水声 *shuisheng*), provides a typical example of the vivid detail in which she describes music:

One can hear a deep drum played in this special manner: One end of the drumsick is gently bounced on the drum a few times (usually 4 beats or so) which is then followed by a few gentle taps by the stick. After a short pause, this pattern on the drum is repeated. Meanwhile, the other instruments, which consist of the large and small gongs and the cymbals, are knocked lightly on the rims with the stick, so that they produce a more tinkling sound than the usual resonant tones. The strokes are spaced sparsely and in a random order. Their relationship to each other is, of course, even more varied. However, every once in a while at the signal of a tap on the conductor’s small drum, all the instruments will come down together—still softly, but together. After this one instant of unison playing, they part again, each going its own way at its own speed and randomness, until the next tap on the small drum, when they all come down together again. (p. 23)

Pian’s treatment of *jingju* music, as Bell Yung has noted, is characterized by the application of an outsider’s analytical perspective, rather than one determined by insider categorization systems or aesthetic principles (Yung 1993). Unlike other approaches in ethnomusicology, which seek to translate and make legible native appreciation systems, Pian develops her own systems of analysis and interpretation, which are based on her own original insights and training in Western

musicological research. “The purpose of [Pian’s] study is not so much to guide readers in appreciation of Peking opera as to explore a theoretical question using material *from* Peking opera,” Yung writes (p. 79). In the above case, Pian develops her own notion of “rhythmic texture,” which she meticulously defines and then uses as an analytic framework. Pian’s frequent use of examples and comparisons to illustrate her ideas reflects an encyclopedic knowledge of Chinese indigenous theatre and a wide variety of musical performance works and styles. Throughout her essays, Pian introduces technical Chinese terms and definitions for various performance features when they exist. While reading her work, the reader thus also becomes acquainted with such specialized terms. However, what distinguishes Pian’s approach is that these terms serve as tools for Pian’s own original analysis, rather than as absolute principles that determine the direction analysis can take.

Another characteristic of Pian’s work on oral theatre is her consistent focus on performance as dynamic enactment, rather than on notation as fixed text. One way in which Pian explores this relationship is through her attention to the variety of possible relationships that can occur between music and dramatic action during a live performance. Just as both coordination and lack of coordination are important to the creation of rhythmic texture for Pian, both presence and absence are important in her analysis of the relationship between performance actions and music. Pian considers, for example, how deliberate pauses in the music can draw attention to specific plot points, or how a steady rhythm can keep the audience’s attention when actors are temporarily offstage. This attention to relationships of both presence and absence, as well as of complex arrangements between diverse performance elements as enacted in time and space, make Pian an especially insightful interpreter of *performance*, an artistic mode distinguished from drama and notation by its very qualities of duration, liveness, and multimodality. This sensibility appears clearly in Pian’s 1972 publication “Text Setting with the Shipyi Animated Aria,” often considered one of her most important articles, which demonstrates the importance of performance over notation in tune identity, through an analysis of variations in *jingju* tunes (Yung and Lam 1994: 5). Pian was visionary in her anticipation of “performance” as a research methodology for music and theatre research, an approach that eventually spread into other fields of the humanities and social sciences, where it transformed existing paradigms across North American academia (Jackson 2004).

Pian was also interested in the relationship between narrative and dramatic forms in Sinophone performance. Although deeply invested in the study of *jingju*, a primarily dramatic form, Pian was also interested in narrative forms and forms that combined both nar-

rative and dramatic elements. Against dominant ideas, which posited a developmental relationship in which narrative performance evolves into dramatic theatre, Pian placed no inherent value on dramatic over narrative forms. In her article “The Twirling Duet: A Dance Narrative from Northeast China,” published in 1985, she explicitly rejects the developmental argument, instead arguing for mutual influence and simultaneity as characteristics of the relationship between these performance modes. In Pian’s characteristically meticulous fashion, this article offers a complete translation and line-by-line analysis of a Dongbei *errenzhuan* performance that she recorded in 1981. She demonstrates that line splitting and shifting between narrative and dramatic modes, rather than problematic qualities of this genre, are central to the performers’ artistry and key components of what makes the genre exciting from both an audience and a scholar’s perspective. “The two performers not only play many different roles, but also present the story through different narrative modes. At times the straight third-person narrative is used. More often, however, one begins with the description of a character, and then the same singer proceeds to assume the role of that character and begins to speak in the first person” (Pian 1985: 221). Keeping with her attention to holistic theatrical forms, Pian analyzes these narrative shifts as they relate to performers’ movements, gestures, prop usage, and music. Like many of the performance genres Pian wrote about during her career, *errenzhuan* was largely unexamined in English-language scholarship at the time this article appeared. Thus, as with much of her other work, this article helped introduce a new performance form to an international community of ethnomusicologists and Asian theatre specialists.

Beginning in the 1970s, Pian played an important role as intermediary between Asian and North American academic communities. During her regular visits to China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, Pian regularly brought gifts of academic books, performance recordings, and electronic equipment not then available to her abroad colleagues. In 1974, Pian became one of the first Western scholars to lecture in mainland China after the founding of the PRC in 1949, and she continued to regularly give lectures during her trips in the decades that followed (Yung et al. 2013). In these visits, Pian introduced Asian scholars to new theoretical and methodological approaches in Western musicology and ethnomusicology, and she learned new ideas and perspectives from her Asian colleagues. Back at her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Pian shared the resources gained through her field research with students and friends, often bringing together diverse groups of people to converse and share ideas, generating experiences that left deep impressions on those who participated (Yung and Lam 1994: 1–2).

Pian was personally reflective about her role as both an insider and outsider to Chinese musical culture. In an essay titled “Return of the Native Ethnomusicologist,” published in 1992, she writes:

Given the present social and political conditions of the world, a musical scholar’s own cultural background can often be quite mixed. Take myself as an example: when I was young, like many children of the modern day Chinese families in urban cities, I was brought up in China in an almost totally Western musical environment. Later on, when I went to college in the United States, I majored in music. At the time, it automatically meant training in Western music theory and history. Only in the latter part of my graduate school training did I decide to specialize in Chinese music. (Pian 1992: 2)

Pian’s various positions as a US-educated Chinese American, a self-defined native ethnomusicologist, and an active intermediary between multiple scholarly communities may have contributed to the strength of Pian’s research and her ability to work across diverse methodologies and research topics. As Lam (2003) has noted, Pian’s work was innovative in part because it applied approaches developed for the study of Western music to Chinese musical sources. Her scientific positivism, Lam argues, was a feature of North American musicology that distinguished her from approaches taken in the majority of classical Chinese music scholarship. In my own reading of Pian’s essays, I was surprised to see the large extent to which Pian engaged directly with Chinese-language secondary scholarship. Pian frequently cites Chinese scholars by name in the body of her essays, suggesting that they, rather than her North American colleagues, are her primary theoretical interlocutors. As scholars of Asian performance, we all face challenges of scholarly community, audience, and personal relationships to our subjects of study. In her management of and reflection upon these relationships, Pian was also ahead of her time and remains a model for current and future scholars.

In this respect, it is likely that Pian learned much from her parents, both of whom were social visionaries, as well as extraordinary contributors to intercultural understanding and exchange. Pian’s mother, Yang Buwei 杨步伟 (1889–1981), came from a Nanjing-based family of multigenerational late Qing officials and was one of a small number of highly educated, professional Chinese women of her era. Yang had studied medicine at the Imperial Tokyo University and practiced gynecology and obstetrics at her own hospital in Beijing from 1919 until 1921, after which she gave up her career to follow her husband (Jin 2011). Between the birth of her first child, Rulan, in 1922 and the family’s permanent move to the United States in 1938, they moved frequently between China, the United States, and France. During this

time, Yang was active in social work and women's health and became "one of the earliest promoters of birth control in China" (Pian 1995: 2). In the United States, Yang wrote several books designed to introduce mainstream white American readers to Chinese culture, including *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese* and *Autobiography of a Chinese Woman* (Jin 2011). The former, to which Pian also contributed, is credited with introducing the terms "stir-fry" and "pot sticker" to the English language (Colleary 2013).

Pian's father, Chao Yuen Ren 赵元任 (1892–1982), was a prominent linguist and well-known amateur composer born in Tianjin, also to a family of late Qing scholar-officials (Boorman 1967). In 1910, Chao won the support of a Boxer Indemnity Scholarship to study in the United States, where he attended Cornell and became a classmate and close friend of Hu Shi, an influential Chinese intellectual who later became China's ambassador to the United States. Chao was a pioneer in modern Chinese dialect studies and became one of the architects of "Gwoyeu Romatzyh" 国语罗马字, a Chinese romanization system. Chao also developed an influential system for teaching Mandarin to foreigners, contained in his textbook *Mandarin Primer*, published in 1948 ("Zhao Yuanren" n.d.). Pian's first position at Harvard University was as a language instructor, where she replaced her father, who left to teach at the University of California, Berkeley (Mote 1961). In 1960, Pian published her own supplement to Chao's textbook, titled *Syllabus for the Mandarin Primer*. Chao's love for the piano inspired Pian's early musical education (Pian 1995), and through her parents, Pian was widely connected in the US academic and literary community from a young age. Chao had served as Bertrand Russell's personal interpreter during the latter's lecture trip to China in 1920, and close friends of the family included prominent American writers Lin Yutang and Pearl Buck (Jin 2011).

As a teacher and mentor, Pian shaped the fields of ethnomusicology and Chinese studies. In 1960, while serving as lecturer in Chinese language and literature, Pian offered Harvard's first course in ethnomusicology, helping to initiate what in 1991 became a more formal ethnomusicology program (Bannatyne 2014). Through her teaching of Chinese, Pian shaped the careers of a number of influential Sinologists, including Perry Link, Ezra Vogel, Frederic Wakeman, and Andrew Nathan, among others (Link 2013). She also trained many prominent ethnomusicologists, including Bell Yung, Robert Provine, Joseph Lam, Amy Ku'uileialoha Stillman, and Siu Wah Yu (Yung et al. 2013). Like Pian herself, her students have traversed the boundaries between theatre, ritual, and music, contributing foundational scholarship on the musical performance of Asia and the Pacific region (Lam 1998; Provine 1988; Stillman 1998; Yu 2001; Yung 1989). Other promi-



FIGURE 1. Rulan Chao Pian and her father, Chao Yuan Ren, in 1944. (Photo: Courtesy of Chinese University of Hong Kong Library)

nent scholars and practitioners of Asian performance whose lives were touched by Pian include Matthew Isaac Cohen, Lei Liang, and Chen Yingshi (Chan 2013). Upon her retirement in 1992, Pian was honored with the title professor emerita, and a symposium was held in her honor titled “Ways of Representing Music.” The festschrift that resulted from this symposium contains essays by colleagues and students across the discipline of ethnomusicology, showing the breadth of Pian’s influence and appreciation within her field (Yung and Lam 1994). Pian was named a fellow of the Academia Sinica of Taiwan in 1990 and an honorary member of the Society for Ethnomusicology in 2004 (Yung et al. 2013).

NOTE

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